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Afro-American Women in the play *Intimate Apparel*

Abstract : *Intimate Apparel* talks about the identity and struggles of Afro-American women. The play portrays the state of metaphorical ‘reconstruction’ of women in all facets of life - love, labour and reputation. Esther is a complicated and eloquent metaphor for today’s black women residing in America. Nottage has set her female characters free from the constraints and prejudices of the society by casting women significantly outside the shadow of patriarchy and racism by endowing them with awareness, ambition and assertiveness. Her play is layered with metanarratives that set up multiple images of freedom that the Afro-American women pursue throughout their lives.

Keywords – Afro-American Feminism, *Intimate Apparel*, *Intimate Spaces*, Racism, psychological colonisation.

Introduction

Over the years, African American women have been facing racial discrimination, gender oppression, and identity crisis in American society. An African American woman remains invisible and unidentified in the mainstream society. Afro-American women playwrights have used the power of theatre to free themselves from the dominant white community and their male counterparts. It is notable that the real struggle and fortitude of the doubly

victimised get a space only in the plays of the African American women playwrights. The pioneer African American women playwrights like Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy et al. have used theatre as a medium to construct and communicate African American women's sufferings, and thus brought the reality to the limelight. An African American woman's entity is ignored in the Afro-American community and mainstream society in general. These playwrights have penned to enlighten the Afro American women, and thus opened the vistas of liberation hitherto denied to the African American women by the American society.

In the preface of the book entitled *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson said:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognised and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that people are great until that people produces great literature and art.

Art and literature can bring into the limelight the greatness of reality. It is true with Lynn Nottage, an icon who has taken theatre as an excellent medium to deconstruct the stereotypes, racism, sexism, and the gender oppression that prevail in the American society. In this regard, her play delves deep into the issue and deconstructs the typical image of a black woman popularised by the mainstream theatre. *Intimate Apparel* is a story of a working-class woman of colour in her thirties who is caught in a vicious circle, crawling through the mundane normalcy of a life not lived to its fullest. The female protagonist, Esther decides to change something about her life, and even though her decision is met with ridicule from her mother-figure Mrs Dickson, Esther marries a man who courted her for months via snail mail and moves out of Mrs Dickson's Boarding house for the Unwed Females. When things do not

work out with her friends and her new husband, Esther is forced to rethink her ideas of intimacy and how she can reach her goals of achieving it, and ultimately happiness. Lynn Nottage acts as the mouthpiece for all the Afro-American women who have been silenced by the society. Esther, the protagonist of the play, isolates herself from the other Afro-American women because of her unattractive countenance; nevertheless, she hopes to open a beauty parlour for African American women. She is a thirty-five-year-old illiterate seamstress who stitches corsets for customers who range from wealthy white women to a black prostitute. Though she stitches corsets for customers of different social standing, she does not like socialising, and when she is invited by her landlady Mrs Dickson, to attend the marriage party of one of her customers she refuses it. She feels diffident and tries to avoid being with people who are attractive. She considers herself a piece of furniture, a non-living thing that does not deserve any attention from anyone. In reply to Mrs Dickson's invitation, Esther says, "Please, Mrs Dickson, I can't, really. I'll just stand there like a wallflower. If I had your good looks, I'd raise a bit of dust myself. Ain't nobody down there interested in me" (10).

Here Nottage gives a clear notion that uneducated Afro-American women are diffident and they remain subservient to their white counterparts. Esther, who is an uneducated seamstress, hesitates to attend the marriage party because of her conviction that she is terrible looking. Esther has embraced loneliness and is not intimate to any characters in the play. She sews different kinds of apparels to different characters in the play, but she does not show any intimacy to her customers. Mrs Dickson gives Esther a letter written by George, a labourer engaged in the construction of the Panama Canal. He often writes letters to Esther, and Mrs Dickson comments that a man who writes letters cannot be relied upon and she further remarks, "I know these kinds of men. Sugared words, but let them stick to the page and go no further. He'll steal your common sense, he will, and walk away. It just don't seem like you. Esther, you're too practical a girl for this" (32). But Esther's reply put forth a different

attitude. She says, "To who? Mr Charles? Remember it's me you're talking to, not Doreen or Erma, or one of those other silly openhearted little gals. And yes, I'm writing letters to a man. And it may come to nothing. But I am his sweetheart twice a month, and I can fill that envelope with anything that I want" (32).

The letters in *Intimate Apparel* play an important role in transforming the disillusioned protagonist into a confident woman, a woman of self-worth and it adds to the denouement of the play. It can be compared to Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. In this novel, Celie writes letters to God stating her own tormented experiences. In *Intimate Apparel* George and Esther exchange their love, aspirations, and dreams through the letters that they send each other. Through the play, Nottage also unravels the villainy of Afro-American men who exploit their female counterparts. Relationships play an important role in *Intimate Apparel*, and it also manifests how the support and love of a man transforms a disillusioned Afro-American woman into a confident woman. George writes:

And if I told you it's been months since I've seen a decent woman, it wouldn't be a lie. There are caravans of sweet-faced Indian girls offering up their childhood for a half day's wage. Yes, many men leave here with less than they come. I shan't be one. It isn't appropriate, but I will say it. I crave a gentlewoman's touch, even if it only be to turn down my collar or brush away the dirt in the evenings. Indeed, I'd like to meet you as a gentleman. I think much about the suit I will wear, and the colours that your eyes find pleasing. I imagine your cobblestone roads and the splendid carriages on the avenues, and a dry place to sit. I think of you running silk thread between your fingers and find a bit of holy relief, for your letters arrive just in time to ward off temptation. (Nottage 31)

Esther is a character, who suppresses her feelings, frustrations, and desires. She falls in love with George, weaves dreams about a blissful marital life with a man whom she has

never seen except for the letters that she has received from him. She has been portrayed as a detached woman, who never looks forward to a prosperous future. The influence that George wields on her through the letters transforms her into an ordinary black woman who dreams of a peaceful family life. The letters which George sends to Esther sound as if he pours out his heart for her. There is a cautious attempt on the part of George to portray him as the best gentleman ever lived in the world. He extols his virtues, which he claims not to be found among other working-class men. He succeeds in convincing Esther that she will not get a better partner in life than him. She is overwhelmed by George's letters and his words make her hopeful. One thing which is notable that Nottage has used theatre as a medium to educate and enlighten the African American women who do not assert their rights in front of the dominant whites who try to suppress and denigrate them. Gaining an equal foothold with their white counterparts is not a cakewalk for the African American women, and they normally tolerate the insults they experience in the American society. Esther interacts with the white characters in the play, and she is disparaged more than once by the white character, Mrs Van Buren. Though Mrs Van Buren likes writing love letters on behalf of Esther, she does not want other whites to know that she helps a poor black illiterate seamstress in putting down her thoughts for her lover. Van Buren says, "Mercy if my friends knew I spend the day writing love letters to a coloured labourer, they'd laugh me out of Manhattan. (Nottage 37). In reply, Esther says, "People do a lot of things that they don't ever speak of" (37). Mrs Van Buren's reply is interesting. She says. "I smoked opium once, with the most proper of women. She dared me, and I did it. And you? What have you done?"(38). Mrs Van Buren ridicules Esther stating that she has done great deeds like smoking opium which an Afro-American woman like Esther cannot even think of. She indirectly points out that Afro-American women can never do anything that the white women consider as a courageous act. She tries to demoralise Esther if at all she has gained a little confidence because of the moral support that

she gets from George. Mrs Van Buren is a little different from other white women of her class, and she enjoys spending time with Esther. Mrs Van Buren has an unsatisfied marital life, and she hopes to have a lesbian relationship with Esther. It cannot be interpreted as a genuine love for Esther, but she hopes to get some sexual gratification from Esther, expecting that Esther would reciprocate her lust. She thinks that Esther would give in before her because of her racial status, but contrary to her expectations, Esther does not reciprocate her sensual approaches. When Esther asks whether she loves Mr Van Buren, she replies that "such a question is romantic" (Nottage 64). She takes it as an opportunity to tell Esther of her frustrated marital life, and she wishes to have a lesbian relationship with Esther. There is an indirect hint from Esther's side that she would have begun a relationship with Van Buren, had she treated her as an equal. She does not want to have a relationship with a woman who does not even permit her to enter through the front door of her house. This is the beginning of Esther's realisation of her self-worth. The sporadic presence of the white characters is a stark reminder of the racial oppression prevalent in American society. The play is a silent revolution because Esther denounces Mrs. Van Buren's approaches and asserts her standpoint. She longs for love, care, and affection but she does not get what she expects in life. Though it is denied to her in both social and marital life, she objects Van Buren's sensual approaches. Mrs Van Buren exploits Esther racially and sexually, vainly hopes to make Esther her lesbian partner, but she boldly resists the attempt and asserts her individuality as a resilient African American woman.

Esther expects to have a peaceful life with George, and she hopes to get all supports from her husband's side to start a beauty parlour for the African American women with the money she has saved from the minimum wages that she gets. Marriage takes the white women to a different phase of life, where they can enjoy the pleasures of life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the book entitled *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men*

and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution remarks, "Marriage is the woman's proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, her natural end. It is what she is born for, what she is trained for, what she is exhibited for. It is, moreover, her means of honourable livelihood and advancement" (317)

Though Mrs Van Buren belongs to the class that Perkins has referred to, she too is not satisfied with her status as wife to Mr Van Buren. Afro-American women, on the contrary, cannot expect any improvement in their living conditions once they get married. Instead, it multiplies her responsibilities, and she never gets the luxury of having space and time for her own in her husband's household. African American women strive hard to balance her various roles and to free themselves from the shackles of suppression. The love she has for George is not physical but an emotional one, where she finds solace in his honey-coated words. Esther never hides anything from George, and she expects the same from George. George appears to be honest as they talk about their family history. Esther says:

I come here from North Carolina at seventeen after my mother died of influenza. My father died two years later, he was a slave you see and didn't take to life as a free man. He'd lost his tongue during a nasty fight over a chicken when I was a baby, so I never heard him speak: no complaints, no praise, no gentle words, no good-bye. He was silent. Broken really. I come to this city by myself, worked my way North little by little, picking berries in every state until I get here. An old woman in the rooming house teach me to sew intimate apparel, saying folks 'll pay you good money for your discretion. It was just about the best gift anybody give me. It was as though God kissed my hands when I first pulled the fabric through the sewing machine and held up a finished garment. I discovered all I need in these fingers (Nottage 51-52).

In reply George says:

My parents were chattel... born to children of chattel. We cut sugar cane and die, and that our tale for as long as anybody could say. Nothin' worthy of a retelling, really. I come here so the story'll be different, that I hopin'. Now if yuh don' mind, I spent many nights on a hard, wood floor, a bed be long overdue. We married. I ain'gonna commit no crime 'ere, a man and wife don't 'ave no quarrel in the bedroom (52).

Esther and George start their marital life happily. Esther completely trusts and relies upon George. In reality, George is a person who squanders money on liquor and women. Leiner, Compton, et al. in an article entitled: *Intimate partner violence, psychological distress, and suicidality* pointed out "Although women from all ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels experience intimate partner violence, women who are African American, young, poor, divorced, or separated are the most frequent victims" (473-481).

To bring out the realistic portrayal of American society during the era in which the play is set, Nottage presents the character named Mayme, a pianist, and prostitute. Mayme and Esther are portrayed as close friends. Though Esther is a seamstress, she has a dream of opening a beauty parlour for the African American women. Esther expresses her dream to Mayme and says that she has saved money to open a beauty parlour where Afro-American women can expect to be treated with respect. She says, "The smart set. Some place east of Amsterdam, fancy, where you get pampered and treated real nice. Cause no one does it for us. We just as soon wash our heads in a bucket and be treated like mules. But what I'm talking about is some place elegant" (Nottage 27).

Afro-American women have experienced heinous discrimination in comparison to the other women of low social standing. They are discriminated against due to their kinky hair, skin colour, and the poor economic status. They have undergone unimaginable oppression both in the mainstream society and in their patriarchal household. Even in the beauty parlour, they are treated like mules; whereas white women are treated like queens. This is the main

reason for Esther's wish to open a beauty parlour for Afro-American women. She believes that Afro-American women deserve respect as much as their white counterparts. Esther enters the threshold of marital life with full of hope, but it gets shattered when she confronts the real character of George. There are unrecorded instances of oppression that the Afro-American women experience in their household, but the intolerable oppression is the domination by their male counterparts. When she shares with George, her idea of opening a beauty parlour, he mocks at her, commenting that she is unattractive.

Intimate partner abuse is widespread among African American women, and in some cases, they go insane because of the unbearable torture and partner's extramarital relationships. Beth Richie in her book *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women*, remarks:

By far, the majority of the detainees are women of colour from low-income communities. Over fifty per cent are African American. While the “official” sources report that at least half of the women there are battered women, my experience as an activist and advocate in anti-violence programs had me convinced that far more than that have been abused by their partners (3).

A clear idea of this remark is what getting through the conversation between Mayme and Esther. Mayme says:

Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room.

Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me. My Panama man came and gone a long time now. It sweet that he writes you, but, my dear, it ain't real. (28)

However, Esther's reply has a blind trust. She replies, “Yes, he here in my pocket in a cambric walking suit. He has a heliotrope handkerchief stuffed in his pocket and a sweet way about him. He so far away, I can carry him in my pocket like a feather” (29).

Esther blindly trusts George, but when she confronts the reality, she is completely devastated. George reveals that a mulatto boy used to write the letters and that he is not even aware of the contents of the letters. Though both are illiterate, Esther's words come from her heart, whereas, George gives money to a mulatto boy and he merely writes whatever that comes to his mind. Esther comes to know about Mayme's and George's relationship when she finds the silk jacket that she presented to George on their wedding day in Mayme's house. Though his extramarital relationship shatters her, she, however, tries to please George by dressing herself like Mayme. Despite putting in efforts, she fails to attract George because his only intention was to squander her money. She thinks that it is because of her failure to satisfy his lust that George maintains a relationship with Mayme. Charlotte Perkins Gilman has commented that a married woman's life is no different from that of the life of a prostitute. He said, "Pleasing a man, therefore, becomes a woman's job in life, which means that the married woman, viewed economically, differs very little from the prostitute; both exchange sexual service for support" (qtd. in Ammons 347). Male domination is ingrained in the African American community, and it is not an easy task for an African American woman to assert her identity. Nottage, through the character of Esther, portrays a strong, resilient African American woman, who is opposed to the meek and worthless women characters popularised by the mainstream media. Though she is shocked when she comes to know about George's relationship with Mayme she overcomes it. Their loved ones sometimes cheat African American women, and at times they also fall prey to their deceptive female friends. Nottage deliberately creates the character of Mayme to warn the Afro-American women of the betrayal that they may experience from their bosom friends. Poverty and unattractive physical features can disillusion an individual, and it may even hamper the fulfilment of one's dreams. Women playwrights have utilised the power of theatre to expose the depravity and disparaging position of Afro-American women.

Conclusion

Nottage, through the play, *Intimate Apparel*, ignites the minds of the Afro-American women that they should not fall prey to the oppression and psychological colonisation of their male counterparts. Esther, the protagonist of the play, is exploited both economically and sexually by her husband. Though the racial and patriarchal dominance tramples her, Nottage has presented the protagonist as a recalcitrant woman who liberates herself from all shackles and starts her life anew.

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